

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Gaylord: Okay, my name is Gaylord Pierson. I was born and raised in Gillette. I happened to spend the winter of '49 here. I stayed on the edge of town with my aunt and uncle. They had a place here, 10 acres. Ours was the last place on the [Four Jay 00:00:25] Road that they cleaned the highway and then stopped.

Speaker 2: Let's take that over. Their place was the last ... start from there. Their place on the Four Jay Road was ...

Gaylord: Their place was on the Four Jay Road was the last place on the Four Jay that cars went. Everything was snowed in from there on in. That's at the top where the library is now. Anyway, when I was staying with my aunt and uncle, snow started in '49 and my uncle and I would take our scoop shovels in, because the wind blew so bad at night that everything would just fill up with snow. We'd always have about 2 foot of snow to get off the door. We'd have to shovel getting out and shovel out to where the cars were, get stuff started, and then we'd drive through his pasture to get to the road. The county finished that road right at my uncle's place. It made it halfway good.

Anyway in those days, very few roads were [00:02:00] [braided off 00:02:02] for Gillette. The Four Jay Road, it ended there. The US Highway, 1416, that was all snowed in except for the road going to Wyodak. The road going to Wyodak they used, oh a cat or two and a scraper. They scraped it every morning and a cat or two took care of the snow. Then these trucks, just old [inaudible 00:02:40] trucks would go in and get coal. In those days, probably 95% of the houses were coal. All these people called the fire department or [inaudible 00:02:57] delivers coal. Every day there would be a string of trucks going to Wyodak to load up with coal and come back to Gillette and distribute the coal.

Speaker 2: Can you explain what Wyodak is?

Gaylord: Wyodak is a big coal mine 5 miles from Gillette. That was the last road open. In fact, we got most of our groceries and stuff by railroad. There wasn't a railroad train in here for 13 and a half days. Everything stopped. Anyway, going back to Gillette, they had Main Street cleared, and streets going to the hospital. The wind blew so hard at night, it would drift on the house that needed ... [00:04:00] Walk up on any house that you wanted to.

Speaker 2: You could walk up on the roofs of any house?

Gaylord: On the roof, yes.

Speaker 2: Can you repeat that?

Gaylord: You could walk up on any roof in Gillette on the houses that was faced that way. Most of the snow come in, they were froze solid, so you could walk right up. In '49 they talked about how cold it was. It wasn't much colder in '49 than in other times. It ran about 20 below, not 30 or 40, but 20. The wind blew so hard, it blew every night. They were just terrible. Loss of animals and everything. Getting back to the opening of the schools, in all these days of all the bad weather and wind blowing, they never closed school one day. All the country kids used to come to town. Their folks would bring them in on Monday and pick them up on Friday. This time they couldn't pick them up on Friday. They just left them in town. The principal of the high school, he thought, "Hell, I might as well keep school." There wasn't many more that didn't go to school or did. It was just one of those things.

Speaker 2: Where did these kids that came into town, where did they stay in Gillette?

Gaylord: They stayed in different houses in the area. People would have them in [00:06:00]. They'd either rent a room or something. This is where they all stayed because they didn't have buses hardly. They had maybe 2 or 3 buses. They were the little ones. It was [caught around 00:06:21] going to school. All the main roads in Gillette, like I said, they went to the hospital and there was Main Street, and Highway 1416. They were all snowed in, right at the edge of town, with the exception of one going to Wyodak, and it stayed open. They opened it every day so they could get coal. In the good old days, what people used was coal. [Inaudible 00:07:03].

Speaker 2: You didn't hear of anybody getting into serious trouble then running out of ...

Gaylord: No, I didn't. Didn't hear. Most of them had big coal bins and everything. They'd unload and use cats to unload. They did okay. I remember they all filled up ... Different people would call in and take these coal trucks in, fill each little house up or something. I think 95% of the people had coal. That's where it went. I guess the main thing I thought of more than anything was I was in high school then. They opened a [00:08:00] road to Casper, Wyoming. They just drove ... They went through parts of the road where the road went. There was 100 foot drift about 10-20 feet deep, and they couldn't get to it. They had no equipment. They went ahead and some guys were half smart or something.

They took roads and they went to ridges all the way around all the cuts, real bad. Anyway, this is where we started to see all the frozen animals. I remember looking out the window. I thought, "There's an old boy made a sculpture out of a horse." The road happened to go by and it wasn't a statue, it was a horse. It was actually a horse that was frozen solid. He was standing up. We went on and on a

ways. There was cattle frozen, sheep frozen, and even antelope. It was a tough winter. Like I said, it never got so bitter cold at night, but the wind blew every night, and everything was froze. We went to Casper and played basketball. They said the roads were bad again, so we were [supposed to meet Midwest 00:09:39] the next night. The coach said, "No, we're going home."

At the end of the day, where we drove the ridges, they had blowed full. We had to go up to Buffalo and around. That's a town another 70-80 miles long going [00:10:00]. I remember '49. We shoveled and shoveled. Everybody shoveled. A few of the places opened downtown. They ran a little short on food because it all came in by train. There weren't trucks or anything. Finally one trainload got in. We reloaded and that was the way in finally. The Air Force dropped hay to the different livestock around. It was quite a lifesaver for the cattle that got the hay. They flew over, dropped the hay. Some lived, some didn't. It was a tough life.

Speaker 2: Have you experienced a winter worse than '49 since? Some people say the winter, there was some in the 70s that were pretty bad winters.

Gaylord: I'll tell you what, they were nothing like '49. Out of all the years ... I put in 82 years here. They were nothing like the '49 blizzard. Like I said, the wind just kept blowing. When you've got 20 below 0, hell it chilled you to the bone. That's why all the animals died. I know they've had winters since and everything, blizzards, but believe me, it was nothing like '49.

Speaker 2: Earlier on you were describing being at your aunt and uncle's place talking about shoveling [00:12:00]. Did you mean that the snow came in to the house or when you ...

Gaylord: No. No. It just blocked it off. It snowed so much that like I said, you walked up on the roof of any house. You'd take the scoop shovels in the day and scoop them out. Like I said, my uncle and I would drive his pasture different places and get stuck. Everything was chained up in those days. Just lousy weather. Like I said, it wouldn't quit blowing, the wind. That's where all the problem came in.

Speaker 2: When you opened the door to your aunt and uncle's house, was there a wall of snow in front of you?

Gaylord: There was about 2 foot. You'd shovel your way out. We had a high bank on each side getting out of the house. Running about 10-15 foot then it'd open up a little bit. It was a long winter. He'd got a bunch of coal just before, so he was okay. Everybody that ordered coal, usually had enough to run for 3 weeks to a month. Most of the places had coal, but some didn't. They filled them up as they could through the city. [Inaudible 00:13:43].

- Speaker 2: I heard stories about people telling me that that the winds blew the snow drifts around too. They'd be drifted one particular place one day, and then they could shift around. Did you ever experience that?
- Gaylord: The wind blew different places, but believe me, the snow [00:14:00] froze. Like I said, you could still walk. Drifts would change. It didn't change that much because of the snow was froze then.
- Speaker 2: I'm basically a city boy. I've never heard the term scoop shovel before. I've heard snow shovel. What's a scoop shovel?
- Gaylord: Same thing. It's something like you'd deliver grain in or something. That was what you used in the days. Instead of having a shovel and what you push or something, you had to have something to dig out with. We'd take the damn shovels in every morning. I'd scoop one of them and we spent about 2 hours every morning getting to the Four Jay Road. Then when we'd get to the road, it was okay because that was the end of the road. Right where the library is now, place called Snarly had a place, little ranch out there. He couldn't get to his ranch by the road. He was right across the street from the library. It was a tough winter.
- Speaker 2: Were there any fatalities in Gillette from ...
- Gaylord: Not that I know of. Everybody in those days carried extra stuff in their trunks, like blankets, and a little extra food. Everybody automatic ... you just when winter started you carried a few cans of something [00:16:00] to eat, lots of blankets and everything. I never heard of that.
- Speaker 2: I guess a lot of the ranchers' wives put up food in root cellars and such.
- Gaylord: A lot of them did a lot of canning in those days. All the ranchers and everything else had plenty of food. They had it canned up and everything. They had a meat locker here. I don't know if you remember the lockers, but it was a building and it just had lockers all the way through there. They handled meat there. It was loaded up. Mostly it was wild meat. Mostly deer, antelope, elk. Everybody pretty much had one. They could get downtown to get something to eat. It all worked out pretty good the way it did.
- Speaker 2: Do you remember the people of Gillette really pulling together with one another to help each other?
- Gaylord: They did what?
- Speaker 2: Did the people of Gillette pull together and help each other out?

Gaylord: Oh yeah. That was normal just on any winter day. That's a good town for that. Everybody knew everybody. No matter what happened, if you're having trouble, everybody pitched in to help. It was good people.

Speaker 2: Just the nature of a smaller town.

Gaylord: Yeah, it was. That was the good old days.

Speaker 2: Anything else that you can think of? We covered a lot of territory.

Gaylord: Maybe the Burlington [00:18:00] ditch from Gillette in those days. The snow had accumulated right up to the edge of the banks of the Burlington ditch. It was a big ditch. It wasn't like 2 foot deep or something. It was maybe 20 foot deep on both sides. It was full of snow.

Speaker 2: That was snow on the level then.

Gaylord: Yeah, it was. There was very few places there wasn't snow.

Speaker 2: Travel was pretty much impossible.

Gaylord: Travel, except for a few roads in Gillette, they tried to scoop them every day. There would one day be a drift at one place, one be at another. They'd move it out. There was only probably 10 or 15 roads in Gillette that they tried to keep open for like even though there wasn't much left at the grocery stores. They tried to keep them open to the grocery stores and the hospitals. It was a long winter.

Speaker 2: I don't think I have anything else. You did great. You're a natural.

Gaylord: Yeah. I'm an old natural.

Speaker 2: It happens to the best of us, Gaylord.

Gaylord: Yeah.